

From Prison to the Cemetery

How Ukrainian and Moscow Anarchists Turned Kropotkin's Funeral into a Political Rally

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On February 13, 1921, 78-year-old Peter Kropotkin – “the grandfather of the Russian Revolution” and the “apostle of anarchism,” as he was known to his contemporaries, was buried in Moscow. This funeral was the last political demonstration organized by a non-Bolshevik party in Moscow in that era. Anarchists from Ukraine played a significant role in this event.

At the end of November, 1920, the government of the Ukrainian SSR [Soviet Socialist Republic] abrogated the military-political agreement with the Makhnovists and crushed the anarchist movement in Ukraine. Hundreds of anarchists ended up in prison.

Soon 40 of these activists were sent to Moscow at the disposal of the VChK [Cheka]. Among them were leaders of the Confederation of Anarchist Organizations Ukraine “Nabat” and all the representatives of the Makhnovist movement who were present in Kharkov at the moment of the arrests. These were experienced propagandists and organizers, ideologues and militants, who had fought for years against both Red and White regimes.

But it was not very convenient to the rulers of the RSFSR [Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic] to keep them behind bars. Having defeated the Whites, the Bolshevik brass turned again to plans for revolution in Europe, and hoped to make Western anarchists their allies. So, repression against anarchists in Russia and Ukraine had to be curtailed. And in January, 1921, they began to release the “Nabatsi.” Of course, they didn't release all of them, but only the “less dangerous” ones, and, of course, their release was not unconditional but subject to their pledge not to leave Moscow.

Once in freedom, the Ukrainian anarchists again applied themselves to spreading their ideas. Paradoxically, they were immediately confronted with opposition from their Russian counterparts. Here is how the Nabatist Anatoly Gorelik remembered it:

“Forget about working in Moscow. Moscow is the centre of the Bolsheviks. Moscow is red, there no place for anarchists in it... This isn't your Ukraine. Soon you will lose heart.”

“This was the response I got more or less from prominent anarchists when I asked them about anarchist work in Moscow. In fact, initially I found myself beating my head against the wall in the Moscow anarchist milieu. No matter to whom I spoke about work, the response was a condescending smile or worse.”

But after a few weeks, the propaganda of the Nabatsi began to bear fruit. The same Gorelik described his activities in February, 1921, as follows:

“There was scarcely a single factory-plant meeting that the anarchists weren’t invited to. Every evening the workers filled the anarchist clubs on Leontievsky [Lane] and elsewhere. Everywhere, in the clubs on Leontievsky, at workers’ meetings, at the automobile depot of the Sovnarkom [Soviet of People’s Commissars], in the Ukrainian theatre, in Sergiyev [city near Moscow], and in the universities where I delivered lectures and spoke at rallies and demonstrations, there were serious debates and questions raised.”

Thus, thanks to the deft touch of the Ukrainian Nabatsi, the anarchist movement experienced a new surge of activity in early 1921.

In the midst of this activity, news came from the town of Dmitrov near Moscow: Kropotkin had died.

The name of Peter Alexeyevich Kropotkin was known not only in the former Russian Empire, but also in all the countries of the world. He was born into a wealthy, aristocratic family, and had the opportunity to pursue rapid advancement in any field, but at the age of 18 he chose to become a simple Cossack officer in the remote Siberian periphery of the Empire. His ancestors were proud of the fact that they were descended from the Rurikids, while Kropotkin never used his princely title. He was attracted to science and made significant contributions to the development of geology, geography, history, biology, and literary criticism, becoming one of the last scholar-encyclopedists in the history of humanity. At the same time, he was one of the most outstanding socialists and revolutionaries of his time, the creator of the theory of anarcho-communism, which at the turn of the 19th – 20th centuries had millions of active supporters.

In addition to his listed accomplishments, he was also a pleasant person to talk to. For example, the French writer Romain Rolland wrote:

“I like Tolstoy very much, you know. But I often had the impression that Kropotkin was what Tolstoy was writing about. He simply and naturally embodied in his personality that ideal of moral purity, quiet self-sacrifice, and perfect love for humanity which Tolstoy’s tormented genius wanted all his life, but failed to achieve, except in his art.”

Kropotkin was distinguished by his principles, as he confirmed after returning from 40 years abroad to Russia in June, 1917. Having received an offer from Alexander Kerensky to receive any ministerial post in the Provisional Government, the 74-yearold activist refused:

“I consider the occupation of boot polisher to be more honest and useful.”

But this did not prevent him from taking the side of the Provisional Government on the “Ukrainian question”: without looking into the basic demands of the the Ukrainian national liberation movement and, in particular, the resolutions of the Ukrainian Central Rada, the confirmed federalist Kropotkin wrote an emotional letter, echoing federalists from Ukraine, with the appeal “Don’t sever age-old ties!” Mind you, the letter never reached the addressees, but that was

the result of a decision of members of the Provisional Government, who were just leaving for negotiations in Kiev.

Kropotkin remained faithful to his convictions till the end. Rejecting privileges, he considered any state as a source of only evil and violence. Even under the Bolsheviks, he did not accept any special rations or special quarters in the Kremlin, refused special medical care, and also offers to publish his books in the state's publishing houses.

At the same time, in the Leninists he nevertheless saw at least erstwhile revolutionaries, and tried to reach out to their conscience. In 1919 and 1920 Kropotkin wrote several letters to Lenin, urging him to abandon the system of "Red Terror" and hostage-taking, which he called "a return to the worst times of the Middle Ages and the wars of religion"; "The police cannot be the builders of a new life. And yet they are becoming the supreme authority in every town and village. Where is this leading Russia? To the most baleful reaction"; "If the current situation continues, then the word 'socialism' will turn into a curse." Lenin read these letters, but did not deign to answer them ...

Vsevolod Voline, one of the leaders of the Nabat Confederation, left memories of Kropotkin's state of mind during the last period of his life. In early November, 1920, released from prison by the Cheka and preparing to return to Ukraine, Voline went to Dmitrov to visit his teacher. In conversation "Kropotkin spoke with deep regret that the political-party, statist nature of our revolution had made it a 'typical failed revolution,' and expressed fears for the possibility of far-reaching reaction. But when, with rapt attention and enthusiasm, he listened to the accounts of my comrades and myself about the situation in Ukraine, he brightened up and said excitedly several times:

'Well now, do go there, if our cause is being pursued there.'

And he added with sadness:

'Oh, if only I were young, I would also go there ... to work ...'

Three months later, Kropotkin died.

News of his death became known in Moscow on the same day, namely, February 8. A Commission of Anarchist Organizations was immediately formed to arrange Kropotkin's funeral. At the very first meeting, the Commission rejected the proposal of the Moscow Soviet to hold all funeral ceremonies at state expense. In the evening, Efim Yarchuk, representing the Commission, sent a telephone message to Lenin, chair of the Sovnarkom, with a request to release the anarchists in Moscow prisons for the period of Kropotkin's funeral. The Commission guaranteed that they would return to custody.

Consideration of this unusual request dragged on for a while. The Sovnarkom referred the matter to the Presidium of the VTsIK [All-Russian Central Executive Committee]. Two days later, the leadership of the Soviet "parliament" decided that it did not object to the release of prisoners, but left the final decision to the Cheka "at its own discretion."

The Chekists needed much more time; in fact by the evening before the funeral, the VChK had still not arrived at a decision.

Meanwhile, on February 10, the coffin with Kropotkin's body was sent to Moscow. In Dmitrov, the deceased was well known: in spite of his age and infirmity, Kropotkin was active in the

public life of the town. He took part in the creation and activities of the Dmitrov association of cooperatives, helped organize the local history museum, and enjoyed affection and respect. Hundreds of people in Dmitrov came to see him off on his last journey.

In Moscow the coffin was installed in the Hall of Columns of the House of Unions. The House of Unions was used for the first time to say farewell to a political figure, but this inaugural ceremony was not at all similar to the ones that were to follow. The hall was decorated with black flags. No soldiers or police were present—order was ensured by volunteers from the Commission. At the coffin there was a guard of honour of anarchists—both Muscovites and Ukrainian Nabatsi.

And from morning to late in the evening, thousands of people—workers, students, Red Army soldiers, nonparty people, and members of various political organizations ranging from the anarchists to rank-and-file Bolsheviks—streamed through the Hall of Unions.

In the meantime, the struggle to obtain the release of prisoners for a day continued. On February 11, in response to another request, the VChK announced that it would release only those whom it considered anarchists and only for a few hours. After that, a “flag of protest” was erected in the centre of the Hall of Columns: a huge black banner with the inscription: “We demand the release of anarchists struggling for Kropotkin’s idea— anarchy.” The Chekists ordered the flag removed, but the anarchists put it back in place, protected by guards.

On the eve of the funeral, a single-issue newspaper was published: “Anarchist Organizations in Memory of Peter Alexeyevich Kropotkin. 1842—1921.” Its 40,000 press run was intended for free distribution on the streets of Moscow. The Chekists were also preparing. The word of honour of the prisoners and the guarantee of their comrades in freedom seemed insufficient to them. Therefore, the universities compiled lists of anarchist students who voluntarily agreed to become hostages: in the event that the released anarchists disappeared after the funeral, these young people would be subject to immediate arrest. This story became known only in the mid-1990s from the words of Tatyana Garaseva, almost the last participant in the funeral of Kropotkin. At the time, she was a 19-year-old student at Moscow University.

Finally February 13 arrived, the day of the funeral. From early morning, solemn columns of mourners gathered near the House of Unions to take part in the funeral procession. But the beginning of the ceremony was delayed, since the VChK was unable to discover a single anarchist worthy of being released even for one day: the Chekists alleged that in their prisons “held only bandits.” This could have caused a new scandal. It was whispered in the crowd that the Cheka was breaking its promise to the government. Alexandra Kropotkin, the daughter of Peter Alexeyevich, told representatives of the VChK that the Funeral Commission, with the consent of the relatives of the deceased, intended to remove all the wreaths and flags of the RKP(b) [Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)] and Soviet organizations in a demonstrative manner. This could scarcely be done in a peaceful manner, and the Chekists themselves would be responsible for riots in the centre of Moscow.

Half an hour after receiving the ultimatum, the VChK caved in: a group of anarchists was brought to the House of Unions from Butyrskaya Prison. Out of several dozen prisoners, only seven were released: Nabat members Aron and Fanya Baron, Aleksandr Guevsky, David Kogan, Mark Mrachny, Aleksey Olonetsky, and Olga Taratuta. Anatoly Gorelik, a participant in the events, recalled: “Unkempt and pale, they resembled convicts of tsarist times. Aleksey Olonetsky’s appearance was especially shocking.” But it was these tormented seven anarchists from Ukraine who took up the coffin and carried it all the way to the Novodevichy Cemetery, without relinquishing to anyone else their honourable right to this mournful burden.

The procession was epic, the number of participants being variously estimated at between 50,000 to 100,000. The march was accompanied by the singing of songs: traditional revolutionary songs and ones in which new words were set to old melodies:

“Our Lenin panicked, he issued a manifesto:
All honours to the dead, the living under arrest.”

“We are crushed, comrades, by the power of the communists,
The Chekist-enemy is in charge everywhere.”

The procession halted twice. First at the Lev Tolstoy house-museum, where banners were lowered as a sign of respect for the world-famous writer and Christian anarchist. Secondly, in front of Butyrskaya Prison, where “The March of the Anarchists” was sung along with the prisoners.

This was the last legal demonstration of anarchists in Moscow and, as far as is known, the last legal demonstration of non-Bolshevik political forces in the long decades of Soviet rule. The next one took place only in 1987.

The procession arrived at the Novodevichy Cemetery, where a meeting was held. It was opened by the most well known Russian anarcho-syndicalist Grigory Maksimov, followed by representatives of anarchist organizations, the Left SRs, the Mensheviks, the RKP(b), and the Comintern. The last to speak was the Nabat leader Baron, and it was his speech that was remembered best by those present. Here is a description by the Comintern employee Victor Serge, a former anarchist and future denizen of Soviet prisons:

“Aron Baron, arrested in Ukraine, due to return that evening to a prison from which he would never again emerge, lifted his emaciated, bearded, gold-spectacled profile to cry relentless protests against the new despotism; the butchers at work in their cellars, the dishonour shed upon socialism, the official violence that was trampling the Revolution underfoot. Fearless and impetuous, he seemed to be sowing the seeds of new tempests.”

After the funeral, the anarchists held a private funeral in their club on Leontievsky Lane, and in the evening another meeting was held, this time in secret. The Nabat activists listened to a report by a comrade just arrived from Kharkov, about progress in restoring the organization and carrying on propaganda.

At around midnight, the seven Nabatsi on parole turned themselves in. This turned out to be not a simple matter, as Mark Mrachny recalled:

“We turned up at Lubyanka No. 2. We approached the main entrance in a group, but the sentry shouted at us rudely, and when we announced that we were returning to prison, he decided, apparently, that either us or him had taken leave of their senses.”

The sentry insisted for a long time on a pass, but finally agreed to summon the commandant. Only then was the issue settled: the anarchists were returned to their cells.

Thus ended February 13, 1921, the day of Kropotkin’s funeral.

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